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# GUSTAF FRÖDING, SWEDISH LYRIC POET

BY CHARLES WHARTON STORK

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“ART was born in parochialism, and cosmopolitanism has killed it.” So Mr. George Moore is reported to have said in a recent interview on the death of Art, an event which Mr. Moore places with obliging definiteness about 1880. Now Gustaf Fröding’s first and most popular volume appeared in 1891. Anyone familiar with the volume is led to wonder: first, whether Mr. Moore had any knowledge of it; and secondly, if he had not, what he would say if he had. One thing is certain; namely, that much of modern Swedish literature, and of Fröding’s poetry in particular, is as parochial as the writings of Theocritus or of Burns. As these latter names bring before us visions of Sicily and Ayrshire, so to every Swedish reader the name of Fröding is inseparably connected with his native province of Vermland.

Of course, Mr. Moore might go on to say that, though Art must be parochial, all that is parochial is not therefore Art. This brings us to the real crux of the matter in hand. It will undoubtedly seem daring to assert that the lyric poetry of Sweden during the nineteenth century will compare creditably with that of any European nation in the same period. Nevertheless, few who have come to know the Swedish lyric with any degree of sympathy will hesitate to maintain such a position. Enthusiasts in the cause feel that they have only to overcome the natural prejudice that because a thing is unknown, it is therefore not worth knowing. A particular difficulty is that, despite the small effort necessary to master the language, probably very few persons can be persuaded to enjoy Swedish poetry in the original. This difficulty has been overcome by translations in the case of the Russian novel, and already, in Swedish, for Strindberg in the drama and Selma Lagerlöf in prose fiction. Poetical translation, however, is admittedly a more

difficult field of effort. The only practicable course is to venture on boldly, with the remote hope of being, like Fitzgerald, one of the exceptions that prove the rule.

Though the varied power and charm of the Swedish lyric as a whole cannot be even indicated here, we can hardly approach Fröding properly without a brief survey of his predecessors. The modern Swedish lyric, which had its roots in the folk-song, assumed conscious artistic form about 1750. At first it was largely influenced by German, Italian and French models. The greatest of the early names is that of Karl Mikael Bellman, a consummate master of verse improvisation, who died in 1795. Shortly after 1800, the influence of English and German Romanticism began to be apparent. The most popular writer of this period is Esaias Tegnér, whose masterpiece, the often translated *Frithiof's Saga*, is rather epic than lyric. As in the case of other countries, Romanticism in Sweden was largely characterized by a sentimental interest in the past. In the midst of this, however, appeared a poet of strong native tendencies in the person of Johan Ludwig Runeberg, one of the Swedish inhabitants of Finland. Runeberg turned for his inspiration directly to nature and to the peasant living close to the soil. He was, therefore, the lineal ancestor of Fröding. But though Runeberg was followed by Viktor Rydberg, a poet of much vigor and popularity, there was a dearth of significant names in the period from 1850 to 1870.

Swedish poetry was kindled by the fire of a new personality when in 1869 Count Snoilsky published his poems of travel. Snoilsky, like Goethe, was for a long time a passionate pilgrim in the south, and only returned permanently to Sweden in his later life. In the main, he was an epicurean lover of beauty, and it was rather the combined fervor and elegance of his style than his choice of material which inspired the rising school of young poets. Nevertheless, a number of his later poems deal with the landscape and history of Sweden, and his lyric *In the Porcelain Factory* stoutly declares that it is better to model plain white-ware for the needs of hungry and thirsty working-folk than to design precious trifles for the boards of the idle and overfed.

In 1891, the date of Snoilsky's return to Sweden, there suddenly sprang into being a new school of poetry, which went far beyond him in expressing various phases of the modern individualistic and democratic spirit. "This po-

etry"—to quote Mr. Edmund Gosse—"was manifested almost simultaneously in the works of three very great lyrical artists, Fröding, Levertin and Heidenstam." Without challenging the statement of Mr. Gosse, we may add that, in the universal judgment of the Swedish people, Fröding is now ranked as the greatest poet of his time, if not of the whole range of the national literature. As Heidenstam is still living, and the tradition of Fröding's realism has been preserved by such able writers as Daniel Fallström and Erik Axel Karlfeldt, it will be seen that Swedish poetry is even to-day in a very strong position.

Fröding the man is hardly less interesting than Fröding the artist. He was born in 1860, near Karlstad in the inland province of Vermland, the native district also of Selma Lagerlöf. Vermland is a region of woods, lakes and small mountains; the landscape is full of pastoral charm, and the people are noted for their quixotic love of adventure and their genial humor. The quiet beauty of the summers is shown in the lighter and gentler side of Fröding's poetry; the severity of the winters infused into his style the realism with which he depicts the rude strength and high spirits of the peasantry in their sports, their superstitions and their struggle for existence. It is not surprising to find, as the product of such a climate, a literature full of contrasts more violent than any with which we are familiar. In short, Fröding, the man and the poet, is much what we should expect from an environment that created Selma Lagerlöf's thrilling and tender masterpiece, *The Saga of Gösta Berling*.

Fröding was the son of a retired army officer in moderate circumstances, but from a naturally independent disposition he early began to follow his own devices. He studied at the University of Upsala from 1880 to 1883, but returned to Karlstad to teach school and work on a newspaper. His studies brought English and German influences to bear on his mind. In his collected poems we find significantly two translations of Burns, two of Byron and one of Shelley—a selection of models both democratic and revolutionary. In 1889 he was writing parodies of Heine in German from a German rest-cure establishment. Lenau, who it will be remembered succumbed to insanity, was another of Fröding's favorites. Classical allusions and quotations from Shakespeare are fairly frequent and always

apposite. Fröding's general knowledge of history and literature was wide, though not extraordinary.

The first volume of Fröding's poems appeared, as already indicated, in 1891, under the well chosen symbolic title of *Guitar and Accordion*. Its success was great and immediate. Other volumes followed rapidly up to 1898, when there came a sudden break. The resemblance of Fröding to Burns extended to his life as well as to his poetry. The startling career of the Swedish poet was closed by the results of dissipation; he went entirely out of his mind, and spent several years in the hospital at Upsala. When he was finally restored to himself, his poetic power, or the desire to exercise it, had vanished. He became a strict religionist, and repudiated all of his early work. His attempt to write religious poetry was, on the whole, a failure. Two volumes of prose and verse, *Gleanings*, containing a few good early pieces, appeared in 1910. He died at Stockholm in 1911.

Were we to accept Fröding's final estimate of his poetry, we might in a novel sense repeat the well-worn line, "The evil that men do lives after them." From the publication of his first volume the poet has been idolized with increasing devotion by all classes of his fellow-countrymen. As practical testimony to this, we may note that over thirty thousand sets of his collected poems have been sold, though the total number of Swedish-speaking people is not much over seven millions. Reckoning the inhabitants of the British Isles, Canada and the United States at a hundred and forty millions, this would be equivalent to a sale of six hundred thousand copies for a poet writing in English. After Fröding's death, though he had been for many years unproductive and secluded from the world, his funeral was celebrated with such tributes and general demonstrations as are commonly given to royalty alone. Even now it is said that his grave is kept covered with fresh flowers.

The literary movement in Sweden which Fröding typifies is like the Elizabethan Period of England in this important respect: namely, that in it an influx of new culture came suddenly enough to catch the old peasant spirit. Such a condition is made possible by the fact that in Sweden the strength and independence of the peasantry has been unusually well preserved, as may be seen in Selma Lagerlöf's novel *Jerusalem*. Thus it is that Fröding can unite the

vivid beauty and culture of Snoilsky with the sympathy for peasant life which descends from Runeberg.

The two salient characteristics of Swedish literature as a whole are: first, a remarkable closeness to the earth, reminding one rather of primitive than of modern poetry; and secondly, on the other side, a purely visionary gift, a sort of clairvoyance in the realm of the imagination. It is the former of these qualities which distinguishes Fröding's early poems, the large group dealing with the scenery and the life of Vermland. These often resemble types which are familiar among the poems of Burns. There are supernatural pieces reminding one of *Tam O'Shanter*, scenes of ranting rustic merriment like those in *The Three Jolly Beggars*, and many satires on hypocrisy which recall the keen drollery of *Holy Willie's Prayer*.

Fröding's poetry is too cerebral to indulge often in the artless flow of song so dear to lovers of Burns. As we should expect from their education, the resemblance between the two is not one of style, but of material and temperament. An early victim to wine and woman, Fröding had an understanding sympathy for the whole race of his erring fellow-men, excepting only those of the "unco guid." He finds human qualities in animals, and even in so gruesome a personage as *The Old Troll*, the anthropophagous female giant of Norse tradition. Like Burns again, he has a wide command of humor, alternately genial, grim and ironic.

We shall now attempt to illustrate some of the qualities which we have been attributing to the Vermland poems, offering no other apology than the remark of Mr. Gosse that "few writers defy translation into a foreign tongue more completely than Gustaf Fröding."

A spirited picture of nocturnal merrymaking in the open is found in *They Danced by the Roadside*,<sup>1</sup> of which the last stanzas are quoted. There is a beauty more delicate than Burns could attain in the interlude of natural description:

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<sup>1</sup> The translations used in this article are from *Gustaf Fröding: Selected Poems*. They are reproduced here by permission of the publishers. The stanzas from "They Danced by the Roadside" appeared first in the *American Scandinavian Review*, and are quoted with acknowledgments to the American-Scandinavian Foundation. The quatrain beginning "I only know that the fir-trees" is from Fröding's poem "In the Woods," and has not been previously printed.

They danced there as madly as tow set afire,  
All jumping like grasshoppers higher and higher,  
And heel it rang sharp upon stone.  
The coat-tails they fluttered, the dominoes flew,  
And pig-tails were flapping, and skirts flung askew,  
While the music would whimper and drone.

Then in birch or in alder or hazel thicket  
There was whispering light as the chirp of a cricket  
From the shadowy darkness near.  
Over stock, over stone there was flight and pursuing,  
And under green boughs there was billing and cooing:—  
“If you want me, then come for me here!”

Over all lay the twinkling, star-lovely night;  
In the wood-bordered bay a shimmery light  
Fell soft on the hurrying waves.  
A breeze, clover-laden, was borne from the meadow,  
And a resinous whiff from the pines that o’ershadow  
The crests of the water-worn caves.

A fox lent his voice to the revellers’ din,  
And “Oohoo!” from Bear Crag an owl joined in;  
But they heard not, they heeded not, they.  
“Oohoo!” from Goat Mountain the echo rang,  
And for answer Nils Utterman’s bagpipes sang  
Their doodely, doodely, day!

But we are neglecting to mention the field in which Fröding’s genius is most conspicuous, that of compressed narrative in lyric form. Here he challenges the supremacy of Kipling, or, indeed, one is inclined to say, of any modern poet. Some, but not all, of the Vermland poems are rough and sinister in tone; many gay and idyllic pieces could be cited. A strain of personal feeling appears in several reminiscent pictures, and this leads us naturally across from the earlier and more objective to the later, more subjective and imaginative division of Fröding’s work.

The hard life of the north has inclined many Russian and Scandinavian writers toward realism, and realism means largely first-hand experience. In Fröding’s autobiographical poems, however, this groundwork is illuminated by the visionary faculty which we have already noted as peculiar to Swedish literature. With Fröding this faculty is peculiarly subtle and fascinating. Of his autobiographical pieces by far the most important are *The Ball* and *A*

*Girl in the Eyes*, which are also among the longest of all his poems, running to some two hundred and fifty lines each.

*The Ball*, which comes first in the series of lyrics *From the City*, is one of the best-known poems in Swedish. Nothing is more contagious in Fröding's personality than the healthy fun he has, and conveys, in describing his own eccentricities. The picture of an unconventional youth, uncomfortably dressed, at a formal dance has seldom been surpassed. Next we have the hero's plunge from Byronic cynicism to Byronic fervor, as Elsa Erne, the heroine, appears on the scene. It may be noted in parentheses that there are eleven changes of metre in the poem, corresponding to the changes of mood. The hero makes a sad failure of his attempt to dance, and relapses into a fit of depression that is delightfully humorous when he begins "to speak as Hamlet does in tragic ire."

Then, looking at the floor, I said at last:  
 "Miss Erne, full well you know that youth is dead,  
 That love is vain, and life a desert vast,  
 Through which like pallid ghosts we mortals tread  
 And see like smoke our fond illusions going,  
 In the last rays of twilight faintly glowing."

Naturally the gentleman receives a smart rebuff, and beholds Miss Erne sailing away,

"A trim yacht on the white wave of the dance,"

under the conduct of a better pilot.

Here most poets would end the story, but this is exactly where Fröding's treatment is most characteristic. Disappointed in fact, the sentimentalist takes refuge in fancy. He and Elsa are transported in spirit to "The Seventh Heaven's festal hall," where they behold angels and lovers dancing. Finally, in a passage of extraordinary daring, the hero describes how he leads his lovely partner before the Throne, and introduces himself and her to the Master of the Dance.

Then God smiles down with gentle irony  
 And good, grandfather-like solemnity:  
 "I'm glad that such a pair as you have come.  
 Take what you find here, make yourselves at home,  
 Amid these other youngsters have your fling,  
 And waltz till Heaven's arches seem to swing!"



No doubt some readers will be shocked by what they feel to be the irreverence of the preceding quotation, and it must be conceded that a good deal of Fröding's best poetry is not for the morally fastidious. This fault, if fault it be, is, however, not one of decadence, but simply of boldness and frankness. Other examples of it occur through *A Girl in the Eyes*, a poem by no means as charming as *The Ball*, but even more remarkable as a bit of self-revelation. The underlying motive is, to put it baldly, a love-affair with a bar-maid. But one shudders at seeing the poem so denominated. There is a pathetic ideality about the poor drunken seeker for love that can never be forgotten by those who are not afraid to understand such a creature. As in *The Ball*, Fröding slips from the actual to the imaginary with an ease that baffles analysis. Presto! the bar-maid is an odalisque in a caliph's castle, from which the sordid hero, now become a knight-errant, is about to rescue her with a boat and ladder.

In *The Ball* and *A Girl in the Eyes* we have observed the blending of the real with the fanciful. We may now examine the poet's ability to visualize various themes drawn from purely imaginary sources. This is in some ways his most remarkable field. Here the master shows the full range of his power: we find lyrics of abstract sentiment; scenes from the Bible, from the classics, from various odd corners of history and literature; visions of the Orient (always a favorite subject for northern poets); and even *Dreams in Hades*. And it is most important of all Fröding's poetic gifts that whatever scene or action he undertakes to describe he brings immediately before the eyes of the reader, and invests with universal significance.

He can picture Prince Aladdin when, robbed of his magic lamp and ring, he reels along the street of Bagdad "in ragged helplessness"; and, furthermore, the figure of Aladdin is made to typify the ever-recurring tragedy of genius. This pessimistic note is struck with even greater power in the lines *See Where the Dreamer Comes!* derived from Genesis 37:19, in which the envy of Joseph's brethren is made to represent the hatred of the world for the "son of the Spirit." Not often have eight lines been made to carry a greater weight of meaning:

See where the Dreamer comes! (they said),  
Turning this way his downcast head.

## GUSTAF FRÖDING, SWEDISH LYRIC POET 905

On lonely paths he wanders far;  
He is not as we others are.

He dreams that—curse his lying dream!—  
Sun, moon and stars all bow to him.

He is our father's dearest son;  
Come, let us slay him and have done!

Thus far we have been considering Fröding mainly from the descriptive and emotional side. We may now try to epitomize his philosophy, his "message." One phase of Fröding's modernity is that he exhibits a more incisive intellect than does any other Swedish poet; in this respect he belongs with Strindberg. No fixed type or institution can escape his scrutiny. His delight in life, his passion for reality, however sinister, has been implied. His manner of making the external world seem to sympathize with human feeling must surely have been suggested by Heine. Does not this quatrain recall any one of a dozen from *Buch der Lieder*?

I only know that the fir-trees  
Are wrapped in a mourning-veil,  
And the brooks and the fountains darken  
When the wind has told them its tale.

Fröding in the main is, like Heine, very sound in distinguishing between genuine feeling and sentimentality. His position on sex, as expressed in *Man and Woman*, is that the descendants of Adam and Eve are destined alternately to love and loathe each other, but always to live together. In *A Love Song* he confesses that his praise of ideal love is homage bestowed on an unknown god. His most emphatic conviction as to humanity in general is that of universal forgiveness. We find this beautifully brought out in *Dreams in Hades*, and again in *A Poor Monk of Skara*; the latter, as a summary of life, is undoubtedly Fröding's masterpiece. His brilliant power of contrast is never more effective than when despair changes to hope in the heart of the hero, who is being punished for the murder of a brother monk:

They shut me up in a gloomy cell,  
Then drove me out with beasts to dwell, —  
Wild beasts that catch with cruel claw,

And tear their prey, and bite and gnaw.  
They taught me hatred, sin and deceit,  
While bitterness was my drink and meat.  
I felt myself doomed to death and damnation,  
In Satan's power beyond salvation;  
Condemned to hell at the Judgment Day,  
I lusted now to burn and slay.  
But the sigh of the woods, the voice of the stream,  
The beauty of morning's wakening gleam,  
And the weeping sound of the autumn rain, —  
These brought me back to love again.

To the substance and general character of Fröding's poetry we have now devoted as much attention as a limited treatment will permit. Enough quotations have also been inserted to give some idea of the author's variety of form. The translations, whatever their defects, follow the Swedish very closely in rhythm and rhyme-scheme. We should not, however, pass over the stylistic qualities of the original, which can scarcely at best be conveyed through an English version.

In the first place, Fröding's poetic diction is unusually direct. Improving on the model of Snoilsky, he avoids the common Swedish fault of diffuseness. In detail he follows the natural prose order of the words, avoiding the periphrases and inversions which are common to sentimental verse in all languages. This naturalism is not attained by a descent toward the rhythm of free verse, or prose, whichever one wishes to call it. On the contrary, Fröding's metres and verse-schemes are clear-cut, and his lines nearly all end-stopped. His compactness of phrasing is equally remarkable; he keeps the mid-path between bareness and superfluity of detail with unfailing instinct. In a given number of words few poets can say more or can state what they do say more effectively. This quality at least should be to some degree perceptible in translation. As to range and preciseness of expression, it should be mentioned that Fröding's vocabulary is astonishingly large, new words being obtained by literally borrowing from the German and French, by poetical coinages and compounds, and by the free use of dialect in the peasant poems. It has been said, no doubt with some exaggeration, that Strindberg and Fröding have doubled the potential expressiveness of their native tongue.

We come now to the question of imagery, which so many critics regard as the test of poetical greatness. In this phase of his art, we are again impressed by Fröding's naturalism of style. His figures of speech have an undeniably fresh, new-minted gleam. The senses respond to them; seldom, or never, have they the tepid feel of conventionality. Fröding has the instinct for appropriateness: according as the context may demand, his comparisons are simple with the simplicity of an impressionable child or peasant, and daring with the daring of genius. In the former class is the description of *The Wood Sprite*:

For she was as quick and lithe  
As a snake that squirms on a scythe.

For the higher imaginative type take the following from *Dreams in Hades*, a poem in which vague sensations are connoted with wonderful definiteness:

The moon shone in, but with so chill a beam  
Methought 'twas like St. Elmo's fire in bloom  
Upon some mast o'er darkened waves below,  
Like phosphor-wood too, or the moss-fed gleam  
Of Will-o'-the-Wisp, or when above a tomb  
On St. John's Eve we see a fitful glow.

Homely, comic, grotesque, fanciful or nobly ideal, the sensuous imagery of Fröding is adequate to its function.

Turning to the more mechanical side of Fröding's style, we find great skill and variety of metrical and stanzaic form. In longer poems, such as *The Ball*, this form may change half a dozen or more times to convey the alternation of the moods. Only once in his better-known poems does Fröding dispense with rhyme and regular metre, oddly enough in the first piece in his collected works, an imitation of *The Song of Songs* transferred to the atmosphere of Vermland. In a large majority of cases, he keeps to a strict pattern, with rhyme throughout; sometimes in an informal poem there will be extra lines, mostly rhymed, thrown in haphazard. The regular patterns are often felicitous, and are generally unprecedented in any literature. English poets may well consider the possibilities which they open.

When we consider the handling of rhythm within the line, we note that Swedish has kept closer to the old accentual system of the primitive Teutonic than have English or

German. With humorous or otherwise informal motives, extra syllables may occur almost anywhere within the line. This is, of course, only another instance of Fröding's instinct for appropriateness, and another means by which he gives the close-to-life impression so often spoken of. Dr. Leach, in his book *Scandinavia of the Scandinavians*, calls Fröding a "marvellous metrician," and he is in truth no less. The difficulties of the translator in trying to reproduce his effects are repaid by the pleasure of studying such a master of technic.

In conclusion, we may be inclined to ask: Where as a whole are we to rank this new poet? To attempt any final decision here would be both presumptuous and inconclusive. We can only answer the question by another: What recent lyric poet is more sincerely powerful, more honestly original; more universal in appeal, more penetrating, more varied in mood and subject; more simple, compact and effective in style; more finished in the mastery of his art? That Fröding deserves a high place in modern literature no one familiar with his poetry can doubt. We might be tempted to go further and claim for our favorite a place among the lyric masters of all time; with Pindar and Catullus, with Walther von der Vogelweide, with Villon, and with Burns. With each of these the Swedish poet has some affinity. But it must be confessed that no one under the domination of Fröding's magic is capable for the moment of passing fairly on the claims of a rival.

CHARLES WHARTON STORK.